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P. 52. FRANKLIN MOSES: SCALAWAG by *Michael Collins Piper*
It is highly unlikely that one will see this in a government primary school textbook, but one of the major Jewish contributions to American political history was Franklin Moses, governor of South Carolina. One of the worst of the radicals, Moses was likely one of the most corrupt politicians in American history. And that is saying quite a bit...

PROFILES IN HISTORY

FRANKLIN J. MOSES

Reconstruction's
Most Infamous Scalawag

By Michael Collins Piper

The short, but frenzied, political heyday of Franklin J. Moses was "the golden age of stealing in South Carolina," [footnote 1] according to American historian Claude Bowers in ***The Tragic Era***, Bowers's memorable account of Reconstruction — "the dark that followed the dawn of peace."

While Moses was just one of many crooked Southern "scalawags" — Southerners who allied with the Radical Reconstructionists of the North — what is notable about Moses is that he was the third Jewish American to serve as a state governor (preceded only by David Emanuel, who served as governor of Georgia for one year, in 1801, and by Michael Hahn who served as governor of Louisiana from 1864 to 1865). And the truth is that Moses — by virtue of his very infamy — was far better known (and certainly far more widely publicized) than either of his predecessors.

Photograph of Franklin Moses

Caption:
"Franklin J. Moses
Strangely absent from nearly all maninstream histories of Jewish politics, Franklin Moses may have been the most corrupt politician of his time."

Yet, in numerous otherwise authoritative (and often glowing) histories of the Jewish role in American public life, Moses has become a "non-person," this despite the fact that, as the period newspaper reports cited in Bowers's book make clear, Moses was a nationally known figure whose criminal exploits were copiously noted in the American press at the time. Today, however, not a single one of the three most notable volumes on the topic of Jewish involvement in American political affairs mentions Moses in any way:

- ***The Jew in American Politics***, by Nathaniel Weyl (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1968) features chapters on "The Civil War" and "The Gilded Age" that followed, but Moses is conspicuously un-noticed, despite his infamy during the post-Civil War era.

- ***Jews and American Politics***, by Stephen Isaacs (New York: Doubleday Books, 1974), likewise does not include Moses in its list of "Elected Governors of Jewish Descent," although, perhaps, Isaacs can be excused because the circumstances of Moses's elevation to the South Carolina statehouse can better be described as a "theft" or, more generously, as a "purchase" — and hardly a model of the democratic elective process.

- ***Jews in American Politics***, edited by L. Sandy Maisel (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001) never mentions Moses at all in its list of "Jewish Governors" which like the aforementioned volume by Isaacs, may be skirting around the circumstances of Moses's term of office by noting that the Jewish governors are "listed by year of election."

- ***Our Southern Landsman***, by Harry Golden, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), which ***Publisher's Weekly*** described as a history of "the South's influential Jews," also fails to highlight Moses, despite many otherwise heroic portraits of Moses's contemporaries.

An Internet search of Moses will turn up a tiny handful of references to him, but one, in particular, that does mention his religion, lists it as "Episcopalian." That is incorrect. All of this is ironic, considering the fact, that, as Jewish American Professor Benjamin Ginsberg has pointed out, Moses's family was "quite prominent" [footnote 2] in South Carolina, with several members having distinguished themselves in the Revolutionary War. Not to mention the fact that Moses's own father had himself served as chief justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court — quite an auspicious and distinguished post indeed.

Thus, in easily accessed modern-day literature, the full story of Franklin Moses is not readily available.

Painting showing three men facing each other, with two of them looking over their shoulder's towards the viewer.

Caption:
"Above: American artist N.C. Wyeth's famous painting entitled "The Carpetbaggers" suggests a meeting of three connivers."

However, turning to the right sources-including the aforementioned Professor Ginsberg's little-noticed book, ***The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State***, we can find out more about this remarkable character about whom a lively Hollywood film could be made.

Climbing the Political Ladder

Born circa 1842, young Moses's first step up the political ladder came — through his family connections — when he was appointed private secretary to the governor of South Carolina during the final years of the Confederacy. However, at the end of the Civil War, Moses assumed some notoriety — particularly among his former colleagues — when he became "one of the first of any that were conspicuous in the state to submit to the Reconstruction Act." [footnote 3]

As such, by allying himself with the Radical Republicans in D.C., Moses became, in no short order, one of the worst scalawags of all time. It paid off for him both politically and financially. He was soon made speaker of the Reconstruction-ruled South Carolina state House of Representatives and then, after just two years, assumed the governorship. Although his tenure of office was hardly more than four years total, Moses established a record of flamboyant corruption that has few equals in American history.

The aforementioned Professor Ginsberg, whose book, ***The Fatal Embrace***, is a candid review of the influential — but often unmentioned — role of American Jews in high-level political affairs and of the frequent corruption in which they were intimately involved, has described Moses's career in quite forthright terms:

> **It is interesting that the importance of Jews in state finance during the Reconstruction period helped one Jewish politician play a more direct role in a Southern Republican state administration. One of South Carolina's most prominent Republican politicians during the 1870s was Franklin Moses who served, successively, as a delegate to the South Carolina constitutional convention, speaker of the South Carolina House of Representatives, adjutant and inspector general of the militia, a trustee of the state university, and, in 1872, governor of the state. Moses was a scalawag, that is, a Southerner who supported the Republicans. South Carolina's Republican government, like some regimes in premodern Europe and the Middle East, had a very narrow pool of talent from which to draw. Its political base consisted of uneducated, newly free slaves and a very small number of whites. Hence, the Republicans were eager to have Moses's services even though he was a Jew and former Confederate.**
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> **Like the other Reconstruction-era Southern state governments, South Carolina was forced to borrow heavily to finance its administration and internal improvements. Moses proved to be especially adept at raising money through the sale of state securities and was able to make use of this talent to further his political career. Behind 1868 and 1871, the state legislature, led by Speaker Moses, issued or guaranteed some $23 million in bonds. As in the case of other Southern state bonds, many of these securities were marketed on the European continent by Jewish banking firms. Most, unfortunately, quickly declined in value to less than fifty cents on the dollar and were ultimately repudiated after the Democrats returned to power.**
>
> **Franklin Moses's administrative talents extended beyond the realm of finance. While speaker, Moses organized a 14,000 man state militia composed mainly of black troops and led by white officers. Subsequently, Moses personally traveled to New York to purchase arms and supplies for this force. In the American South during Reconstruction, as in the Third World today, election outcomes depended as much upon the balance of armed force as upon the distribution of political popularity. Moses's state militia played a critical role in bringing about a Republican victory in the 1870 South Carolina state elections when it was able to discourage Democratic sympathizers from going to the polls while simultaneously preventing the Democratic party's paramilitary forces from intimidating black and other Republican voters.**
>
> **The state militia also prevented Moses's opponents from using judicial processes that they controlled against him. During his term as governor, Moses was named the "Robber Governor" by his foes and was often accused by Democrats of diverting public funds for his personal use — a charge that had some merit. At one point, Moses was able to block his own arrest on corruption charges only by calling up four companies of black militia to guard his residence and office.** [footnote 4]

In fact, as Ginsberg points out, Moses was not the only Jew who became prominent in South Carolina politics during Reconstruction. Two of South Carolina's most prominent black politicians of this same era, Francis L. Cardozo and Robert C. DeLarge (both of whom were allies of Moses), were the offspring of black mothers and Jewish fathers. Cardozo served as South Carolina secretary of state. DeLarge was elected to the House of Representatives in 1870 with "help" from Moses's armed militias, but, to its credit, the House refused to seat DeLarge.

In any case, Ginsberg points out, the South Carolina regime under the Moses years "was among the most corrupt of the period." [footnote 5] Claude Bowers paints a vivid portrait of America's little-known Jewish governor and his colleagues:

> **The corruption in state bonds, criminally issued and divided among official gangsters, mounted into the millions, but bribery and bond-looting was not enough for this avaricious horde, which had recourse to the pay certificate steals [thefts] .... When Moses, [then the state house speaker, prior to becoming governor], required more funds for his debauchery and made out a pay certificate for $2500, Lt. Governor Ransier refused to approve unless included ....**
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> **When bribery, illegal bonds, pay certificates did not suffice, the thieves bethought themselves of furnishing the State House. Within four years a people on the verge of bankruptcy was forced to payout more than $200,000 for the purpose. There was a $750 mirror to reflect the dissipated face of Moses, clocks for members in their private rooms at $480, and two hundred cuspidors at eight dollars each, for the use of 124 members.**
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> **The quarters of Moses at Mrs. Randall's rooming house were elegantly furnished at the state's expense. And yet, on the expulsion of the Radicals from power, there was less than $18,000 in furniture to account for the $200,000 spent; the rest was in the homes of the members and their mistresses.** [footnote 6]

When, in 1872, Moses, in Bowers's words, "bought the gubernatorial nomination," [footnote 7] a black band played "Hail to the Chief," an anthem normally reserved exclusively for the president of the United States. At the time Moses assumed the governorship, ***The New York World*** predicted that he would, within two years, "take the last of the sap out of the tree." [footnote 8] Which, it might be added, is precisely what he did.

Described by Bowers as "a lecherous degenerate and corruptionist,"[footnote 9] who was "the black sheep of a decent family," [footnote 10] Moses — who was "notoriously dishonest in the legislature" [footnote 11] quickly made the best of a good situation. With the support of the Republican regime in Washington, Moses had won the Palmetto State's highest office and thus "entered into the land of milk and honey with an insatiable appetite." [footnote 12] Bowers provides modern-day readers with a fascinating portrait of Moses and his shenanigans:

> **Almost immediately, this penniless adventurer had purchased a $40,000 mansion, furnished it with elegance, maintained the grounds and buildings perfectly, and indulged himself in every luxury. Driving through the streets in an expensive equipage drawn by a span of the finest horses, he conveyed the impression of opulence. He was living at the rate of about $40,000 a year, and, while his debts had reached almost a quarter of a million, he was not without resources in the crimes he was committing.**
>
> **A natural actor in the princely role, a correspondent described his domestic establishment as "a well-trained corps dramatique." In the presence of minister or bishop, he was all piety and humility and the good man was impressed with his sanctity and the charms of a pious household. When occasion called, he could "preface a meal with a lengthy and unctuous grace and roll off a well-written family prayer."**
>
> **Even thee domestics enjoyed the comedy. And yet, this "frowsy, hatched-faced, pale young man of a debauched exterior ... with a big mustache and thin hair 'like dried moss,'" could be seen with Negroes and low whites puffing cigarettes and sitting down among the blacks with a hunchback billiard player.** [footnote 13]

In 1877, when federal troops abandoned South Carolina, Moses's era came to an end. Democrats regained control of the South Carolina government, and the new administration brought many of the corrupt Republicans to trial. Never one to lose an opportunity, Moses quickly offered his services as a government witness against many of his former allies, even admitting, under oath, many of his own crimes.

A Cartoon and an illustration

Caption: **Images of Reconstruction:** A Carpetbagger is propped up by the bayonets of Union soldiers as "the South" buckles under the weight. At right, a "carpetbagger legislature" -- a Negro politician tries to make himself heard above the din of a drunken crowd.

And although Moses's half-Jewish/half-black allies, Cardozo and DeLarge, were among those found guilty of corruption, they were pardoned as part of a settlement between the national Republican administration of Rutherford B. Hayes (who had assumed the presidency in the disputed election of 1876) and the Democratic Party, working together to resolve the bitterness in the wake of that national election. Benjamin Ginsberg summarized the political legacy of Moses and his landsmen: "Thus, as part of their intimate connection to the finances, politics and society of the Gilded Age, Jews were involved in many of the most visible and spectacular frauds of the post-Civil War period as well as in the economic dislocations and financial manipulations that characterized the era." [footnote 14]

Despite this brief blaze of glory, however, Moses' criminal career was far from over. According to Thomas Byrnes (chief of New York City's detective division from 1880-1895), soon after his term of office ended, Moses "started in victimizing friend and foe alike." [footnote 15]

In fact, Moses's post-gubernatorial criminal antics were so repetitive and so widespread, reaching into Byrnes jurisdiction and as far west as Chicago and north to Massachusetts as well, that Byrnes felt compelled to include a lengthy profile of Moses in Byrnes's colorful 433-page gallery, ***1886 Professional Criminals of America***, wherein Moses was generally described as a "swindler by bogus checks" [footnote 16] (evidently Moses's chief post-gubernatorial method of operation). Noting that "an account of all [of Moses's] swindling transactions would fill many pages." [footnote 17] Byrnes provided a capsule description of just a few of Moses's many endeavors:

- Arrested in New York and returned to South Carolina in 1878 for passing a forged note in South Carolina for $316. After being placed on parole, Moses evidently escaped;

- Arrested in New York in 1881 for defrauding a military man out of $25. Sentenced to six months in jail;

- Arrested in Chicago in 1884 for false pretenses, but the case was settled;

- Arrested in Detroit in 1884 for swindling a preacher and sent to jail for three months;

- Arrested again in Detroit in 1885 — by Boston, Massachusetts police officers — for swindling another military man, Colonel T.W. Higginson, of Cambridge, out of $34 under false pretenses. Sentenced to six months in jail;

- While in jail in Massachusetts, Moses was then taken back to court for a variety of other swindling charges, involving numerous individuals, and, on Oct. 1, 1885, was sentenced to three years in the Massachusetts House of Corrections. His sentence was set to expire on May 10, 1888. Moses would have been about 46 years of age at the time of his release from prison in the Bay State, but he had already lived a life of crime — and political power — that very few could equal. He died on December 11, 1888.

Because Moses has been relegated — largely — to the memory hole, we know little, if anything, about his final years, but what we do know about his proverbial "15 minutes of fame" is quite bizarre and telling — a little-noted chapter in American political history •

ENDNOTES:
1 Claude G. Bowers. ***The Tragic Era***. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962 edition), 424.
2 Benjamin Ginsberg. ***The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State***. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 252.
3 1886 ***Professional Criminals of America***. Thomas Byrnes. (Reprint edition by Chelsea House Publishers, New York, 2000), 170. 4 Ginsberg, 67-68.
5 ***Ibid***., 74.
6 Bowers, 357. 7 ***Ibid***., 387.
8 Cited by Bowers, 392. 9 Bowers, 423.
10 ***Ibid***.
11 ***Ibid***.
12 ***Ibid***.
13 ***Ibid***., 424.
14 Ginsberg, 74-75.
15 Byrnes, 170-171.
16 ***Ibid***., 170.
17 ***Ibid***., 171